

Homelessness in the Rich Urban: Factors and Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

Civilisation as well as modernisation has long affected all aspects of our lives – the young, the old alike; socially, economically, culturally and spiritually. It severely affects the homelessness people globally. Homelessness is about more than rooflessness. A home is not just a physical space: it provides roots, identity, security, a sense of belonging and a place of emotional wellbeing. This study breaks down the causes of homelessness into individual factors such as drug and alcohol misuse; lack of social support; family background, including family breakdown and disputes; and battered women. This study also includes assistance or help rendered by the public to these homeless people who transit for a week or two at the Kuala Lumpur Homeless Transit Centre (KLHTC) known as “Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur” in the metropolitan city Kuala Lumpur. This research attempts to answer two research questions: (i) what are the factors that lead to homelessness? and (ii) what are their aspirations and hopes for the future? The objectives of this study are to highlight the actual causes of homelessness and what constitute homelessness in Kuala Lumpur. The conceptual framework is derived from theories of Structural-Functionalism (Durkheim, 1938). A purposive sampling was used to select the six (n=6) key informants for in-depth interviews, besides personal observations. These targeted key informants come from various backgrounds and several obstacles were encountered because they were very reluctant to be interviewed. The study revealed that social issues such as unemployment, broken family, social conflicts and deviances are some of major factors. Nevertheless, it also unveils that there are still noble people in the rich urban who care about homeless people despite their ethnicity and backgrounds.

Key Words: homelessness, rooflessness, anomie, deviances, transit.

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a huge problem that almost all country is currently facing. Millions of people, including children, families, babies and the elderly live day after day without food, water nor roof over their heads. Besides, people that are mentally challenged also face the same problems on the streets, which can be extremely dangerous for themselves and also to the rest of the society. This problem has been addressed as a major crisis that is affecting our society. In addition, the number of homeless families with children has increased significantly over the past decade. Sadly, urban areas contain the largest group of homeless families, single mothers and children.

People have not always had to suffer with homelessness. It was a situation that barely occurred due to few unexpected reasons such as errant employers who absconded, closed down of factories or have not paid salaries to their employees for up to several months, leaving them with the last resort that is to sleep in the streets. This problem has been there ever since life begins and the society has many assumptions and negative perceptions towards these homeless matters.

These homeless people are evident in Kuala Lumpur are mostly men in their 40s or 50s who sit around all day and do nothing. They do not make an effort to hunt for odd jobs to support themselves in the midst of poverty. These are the people, who consume alcohol, smoke cigarettes and literally do nothing for a living. On the other hand, the women folks sit along the corridors of shops with their pitiful and innocent look of their little children.

In terms of hygiene aspect, these homeless people are hardy because they live on eating scraps of food from trashed cans, and possible meals from shelters on occasion, but those are usually three times a week at dinner, or some other type of schedule. People who neither have homes rarely think, nor can comprehend what terrible a homeless person will have to go through. They live in abandoned buildings, cars, buses, boxes, on park benches and underground.

They eat bits of old fruit or biscuits found or that has been kept for days or weeks and live practically with what they get for the day. The government needs to help homeless people to get back on their feet. The government needs to make sure that homeless people will not get abused by the systems. As in the system which few managers or persons in charge who come and approach these homeless people saying the homeless people are needed to work in slums or construction areas and a good deal is fixed, but unfortunately they are cheated and only used as slaves.

However, the government has not sat with arms closed. It has formed a few transits to temporarily accommodate these homeless people. The maximum duration is about two weeks. This premise is known as "Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur" (Kuala Lumpur Homeless Transit Centre (KLHTC)). In the city of Kuala Lumpur, this transit can accommodate around 250 people.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Homelessness has been a serious problem in Malaysia for decades. It is not something extensively uncommon among the society and it reflects the nation's progress despite having prominent landmarks such as KL Tower, Petronas Twin Towers and gigantic shopping malls. In Kuala Lumpur specifically, almost every road is overflowed with homeless people searching for shelter at night.

Homelessness can be defined or interpreted in many ways, but is generally insinuated as the state of not having shelter or a regular private space for sleeping, washing, and otherwise conducting one's daily routine. People who have been subjected to homelessness so often have little choice but settled to find refuge and comfort in public spaces, such as in parks and on the streets.

Kuala Lumpur is governed by a body under the Federal Government and has envisioned to realise the aspiration for Kuala Lumpur to be a world class city by the year 2020 and to achieve progress, peace and prosperity through development, controlled planning etc. This includes urban services such as providing accommodation and assistance to homeless of KLHTC.

According to a spokesperson from KLHTC, the number of homeless people in this centre has increased by three-fold from 600 people in 2014 to 2,000 people in 2016. This metropolitan city is dwelled by people from all walks of life from the richest, highly educated, skilled workers to the poorest and unemployed deviance homeless people. As for these homeless people, food is provided besides religious educational talks and reciting the Quran for the Moslems with the mission to reduce social practice and malpractices which may impede the peace and harmony of the city and the nation alike.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research objectives of this study are two-fold as stipulated below:

- (i) to assess the factors that lead to homelessness of the homeless people in the urban city.
- (ii) to identify the homeless people's hopes and aspirations in the future in the urban city.

Based on the above research objectives, this study attempts to address the research questions as stipulated below:

- (i) what are the factors that lead to homelessness of the homeless people in the urban city?
- (ii) what are their hopes and aspirations in the future?

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study applied Structural-Functionalism theory to lead the conceptual framework. The theory promotes stability of society, which each institution contributes to the maintenance of society. Besides, it believes that a society should be in a harmonious state, which works together and fits into society.

Homeless will cause stress, disharmonious and unable to fit into society. As such, the homeless people become dysfunction in their own community as well as in society at large. After having identified their

weaknesses and constraints, assistance can be rendered by caring society with the hope to alleviate the numbers of such misfortune state of living. Basic needs i.e. food, shelter and clothes, of course, are the main necessities for the homeless people to function in society in this world of technology. When they revert to functional society, they should be welcome as part of member of society. Diagram 1 depicts the flow of conceptual framework of the study.

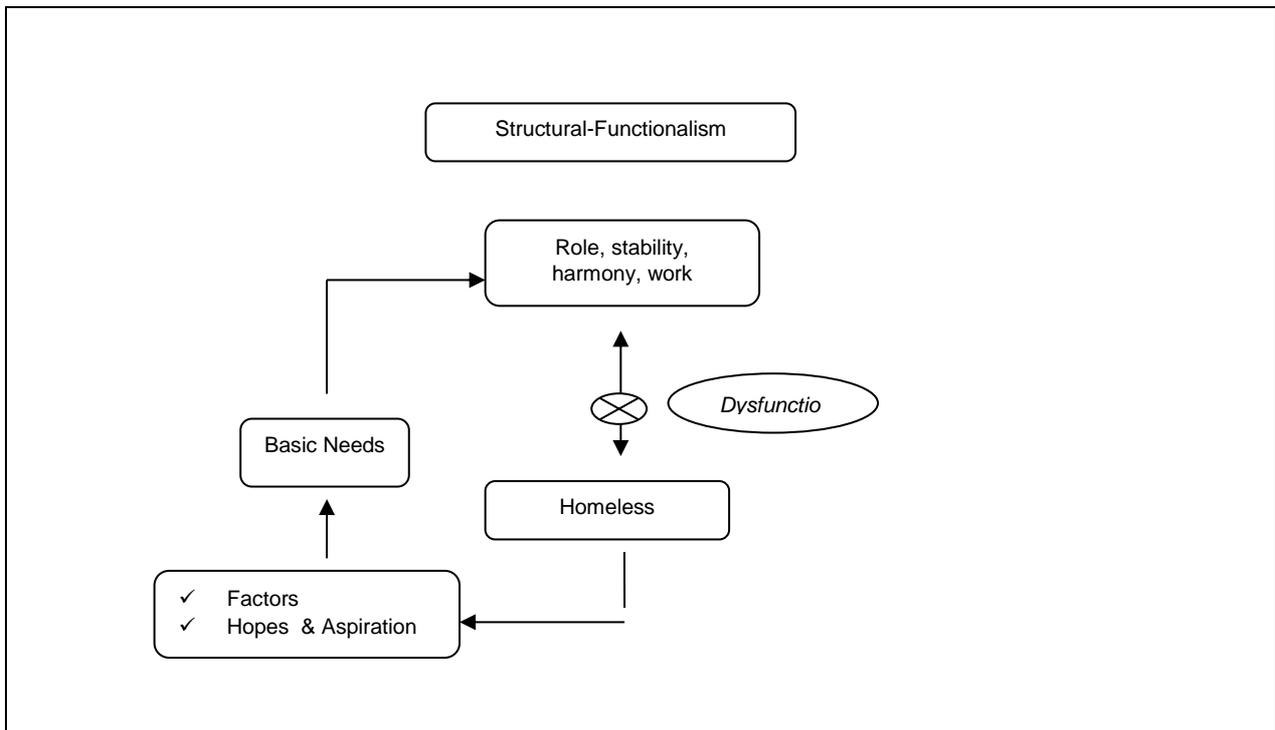


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Homelessness is a complex social problem that is caused by a lot of factors. The homeless are probably the same everywhere worldwide as they need the same things - shelter and protection. However, what cause them to become homeless derives from a variety of more complex reasons. Despite their personal problems that caused them to lose a home, they are also chastised and criticised by the society. The perspectives of the society towards the homeless drive them to become more isolated among the society.

Sharifah Mariam Alhabshi and Alifatul Kamilah Abdul Manan (2012) quoted that the structuralist theory for example theorizes on the inability to access to accommodation or housing. The theory argues that inadequate housing, inequitable welfare and economic systems will have an effect on family and individuals. Continued pressure (supposedly without intervention) will cause and perpetuate homelessness. The functional theory moves away from housing policy or employment structure instead look at the homelessness from the perspective of their behaviour. The tendency of the homeless to isolate themselves is seen as a symptom of dysfunctional, abnormal or even deviant behaviour. The causes rooted from stressed, criticism and violence family. Having mentioned the above, the ultimate result will be that the homeless people become dysfunction in the social circle.

Sharifah Mariam Alhabshi et. al (ibid.) also asserted that "theory of functionalist deviance, (Durkhiem, 1938) as well structuralist deviance developed by Cohen (1956) is an extension of functionalism and structuralism sees homelessness both as a threat to society and a natural dysfunction of a healthy society. The theory is further developed by Merton (1949), which stresses that the way society is structured (for example, class systems) forces deviance on individuals within that society.

This means homelessness (deviance) is part of the nature of society rather than the individual's nature. Structuralist deviance looks at individuals' or a subgroups' position within the social structure of society. Subcultures are seen to be the product of a group of individuals who form an alternative set of norms and values to that of mainstream society. In their extreme, subcultures take mainstream society's norms and values and turn them upside down.

Thus, Cohen's (1956) deviance is perceived as a negative reaction to a society that excluded some members, with subcultures offering those people a sense of inclusion even though this may be viewed as deviance. Homeless culture, then, would be the product of marginalised people within society coming together in reaction against the mainstream to form an alternative parallel culture as cited by Sharifah Mariam et. al (ibid.).

Mead (1934), Blumer (1969) and Goffman (1959, 1968) commercialized the theory as a symbolic interactionist. This theory emphasized on social process rather than structures and functions. Individuals view themselves and their everyday environment in terms of their actions, reactions and interactions with their surroundings. This is a self-oriented approach that places the individual at the centre of analysis and looks at the way they construct, deconstruct and reconstruct themselves, their worlds and their own reality. This theory explains how the norms and values that functionalists speak about are absorbed into collective culture, and the way people construct their self-image and therefore their self-worth.

Indeed no single theory satisfactorily summarises the whole of the problem of homelessness. Each theory proposed certain perception into specific aspects of homelessness which further justify the complexity of understanding the issue and the factors of homelessness.

Dennis P. Culhane (2008) proposes that homelessness is more expensive to society than the costs of solving the problems. Culhane's respondents were those homeless people in the United States of America. Based on his findings of the homelessness among some people are costly to society, and that whereby the solutions to overcome the problems were less costly, as the real goal has been to garner more resources and support for local housing initiatives. It was also discovered services to be utilized in the area of homelessness has helped researchers and policymakers in the US to better understand the prevalence and dynamics of homelessness and the impacts that agencies have on the problem.

This is due to the fact that many of the homeless are homeless because these service systems did not recognize the housing needs of such persons, whether intentionally or otherwise, and do not readily advocate for housing solutions that would result in better outcomes for their clients and their agencies. Despite the lack of civil responsibility among the citizens of United States to curb homelessness, it can be seen that researches done by lots of researchers have been able to attract more people to be aware of the importance of providing local housing initiatives for the homeless.

In another study, Diane Coccozza Martins (2008) addresses the issue among the homeless "besides not having a shelter or a place to stay, they also encounter other struggles. A total of 15 participants were interviewed in this study. Data saturation was reached after 12 interviews but three additional interviews were completed to make certain that no new themes developed. Despite given medical care facility from the government initiatives, the findings of the research shows that those homeless people who have received treatments from the free clinic have gone through severe hardships such as physical and sexual abuse, childhood trauma, poverty, disability, and disease.

In addition to that, the study shows that 25% of people who are homeless experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse; 33% had run away from home; and 27% had lived in foster care, a group home, or other institutions as children. Based on the research, it can be conclude that lack of insurance and the ability to pay are significant barriers to health care, also, homelessness is a complex social problem; its solution requires national policies that increase affordable homes, education, and jobs, as well as health care as a right especially services for mental health, substance abuse, and family violence.

Collins (2013) states that homelessness is a temporary condition that people fall into when they cannot afford to pay for a place to live, or when their current home is unsafe or unstable. This study is done among the homeless in Canada and the population of the homeless was drawn from Niagara with the range of age from 30 to 56 years old (mean: 43 years old). The age at which the participants first reported becoming homeless ranged from age 12 to 19; with an average age of 16 years old and that 55% of the homeless interviewed admitted that they had spent the previous month living in a shelter. One of these 11 participants (n=11) involved, six (n=6) had moved at least once during the month. In addition to that, 7 out of the 20 adults (35%) were currently housed in rental accommodation. Two were in long term boarding situations, with one in a motel and one in a group home.

In his findings, Collin (ibid.) stated that just over one-half of youth (55%) met the definition of being chronically homeless and this group was far more likely to have reported being abused (64%) than the non-chronically homeless youth (33%) in the study (as cited in Baker Collins, 2010). In conclusion, homelessness both among youth populations and among chronically homeless adults is caused by the impact of trauma inflicted by adverse childhood events.

Robert P. Agans, Guangya Liu, Mary Jones, Clementina Verjan, Mark Silverbush and William D. Kalsbeek (2011) identify predictors of respondent's opinions and attitudes towards the homeless. This

study was a face-to-face survey that randomly sampled 3,073 adult homeless people living on the streets or in shelters and through telephone survey of 739 adults living in households with landline telephone access. Based on the face-to-face survey, 24% of the population was considered as chronically homeless, that is, some of them had disabling conditions such as physical, mental health condition, a drug or alcohol addiction, a disability and had been homeless for a year or longer.

Approximately, 11% claimed to be with families while 89% were living alone. A small percentage (2%) reported having HIV positive or AIDS. Plus, 24% were those having mental health problem and 41% which the highest percentage had substance abuse problems. Veterans made up 15% of homeless population and only 9% classify themselves as survivors of domestic violence. Gender compositions of the respondents are 60% of adult male, 32% of adult female, 5 males under 18 and 3 females under 18. Based on the survey, these are the possible factors that cause homelessness according to percentage; drug and alcohol abuse (91%), mental illness (85%), shortage of affordable housing (84%), lack of government aid (71%), physical illness/handicaps (71%), irresponsible behaviour (71%), laziness (62%), bad luck (53%), and failure of society to provide good schools (35%).

These studies have shown that people's opinions directly affect their decisions and actions. Those with increased sympathy toward the homeless blamed the homeless people less and saw structural barriers as more likely causes of homelessness than unsympathetic individuals. If media campaigns held to increase awareness of homeless to show public the seriousness of homelessness and that there are real main reasons why a person might be homeless instead of personal failure and negative stereotypes, sympathy may increase.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applied the qualitative approach and the research instrument was in-depth interviews with a semi-structured questions. The key informants were six (n=6) homeless people who were temporarily staying at Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur (Kuala Lumpur Homeless Transit Centre (KLHTC)). They were three (n=3) males and three (n=3) females respectively and the range of age between 25 and 56 years old. This study utilized a purposive sampling and therefore, the findings do not represent the whole population of the homeless people in Malaysia.

The data of the in-depth interviews were analysed by the following stages i.e. (i) becoming familiar with the data and segregation of the data, (ii) coding the data and categorising the codes, (iii) identifying themes and relationships among the codes and categories and then finally (iv) narrated the data descriptively.

To facilitate the interview, both Malay language and English language were used as the mode of communication. It was because the researchers tried the best to make the informants feeling more comfortable to share their ideas and discussions. Figure 2 is the map of Malaysia, while Figure 3 is the location of Kuala Lumpur in the Klang Valley.



Figure 2: Map of Malaysia and Klang Valley



Figure 3: Map of Kuala Lumpur and Kuala Lumpur Homeless Transit Centre

The following are the pictures of the homeless people (Figure 4), street feeding for homeless people (Figure 5) as well as the volunteers who involved in the street feeding activities (Figure 6).



Figure 4: Pictures of Homeless People



Figure 5: Street Feeding for Homeless People



Figure 6: Volunteers Involved in the Street Feeding Activities

7. DATA ANALYSIS

Six informants (n=6) who temporarily staying at KLHTC were selected randomly as there were a number of the temporary occupants refused to be interviewed. Based on gender, these key informants were three (n=3) females and three (n=3) males respectively.

All the females (n=3) are Malays, while two males are Chinese (n=2) and one is Indian (n=1). In terms of age range, two (n=2) are in 20s, one (n=1) is 30s, one (n=1) is 40s and two (n=2) are 50s. As for education level, two (n=2) of them are Form 3 (lower secondary) school leavers, while the rest (n=4) are SPM (upper secondary) school leavers. Basically, their education level is low.

Three (n=3) of the key informants are unemployed, while the remaining of them work as a security guard or janitor. In terms of marital status, two of them are single, two are married and a divorcee respectively. In addition, three of them are Muslims, one of them is a Hindu and the rest are Buddhists. Table 1 indicates the summary of key informants' profile.

Table 1 Summary of Key Informants' Profile

Key Informants	1 (Minah)	2 (Ganesh)	3 (Mirah)	4 (Alvin)	5 (Lim)	6 (Yati)
<i>Gender</i>	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female
<i>Race</i>	Malay	Indian	Malay	Chinese	Chinese	Malay
<i>Age Group</i>						
20-29	x		x			
30-39						x
40-49				x		
50-59		x			x	
<i>Education Level</i>						
Form 3	x		x			
SPM		x		x	x	x
<i>Marital Status</i>	Married	Single	Single	Divorced	Divorced	Married
<i>Religion</i>	Islam	Hindu	Islam	Buddhist	Buddhist	Islam
<i>Occupation</i>	Cleaner	Security Guard	Unemployed	Cleaner	Unemployed	Unemployed

7.1. Factors that Lead to Homelessness

Based on the in-depth interviews, this study was analysed with two themes, i.e. past social and family, as well as employment.

(i) Past Social Life and Family

In this theme, among others the key informants were asked whether they had been involved in any drug addiction, all of them mentioned that they were never involved. However, according to Mr A (anonymous) who is the person in-charge at KLHTC, 70% of the temporary occupants (the current homeless people) residing at KLHTC became homeless because of drug addiction.

The other question was whether they had been arrested before; only key informant 1 admitted that she had been arrested before due to the accusation of theft. According to the key informant 6, she was 6th month pregnant her fifth child at the moment, however the father of the baby was remained unknown. On the contrary, according to Mr A, key informant 6 was never married before.

All the three female occupants at KLHTC (key informant 1, key informant 3 and key informant 6) said that they ran away from their families for certain reasons. Key informant 3 stated that “...*ada banyak masalah keluarga. Mak dan abah bercerai. Tak ada sesiapa pun peduli. Jadi untuk lari dari masalah macam ini baik saya bawa diri dan lari dari rumah.*”

(translation: ... (my family) has a lot of problems. My parents divorced. No one cares about. So, to solve the problem like this, it is better for me to live alone and run away from home”. She added that her parents did not know where she was, because both individually remarried and had their own families in Kedah.

As for key informant 4, he became a homeless due to his marriage problems. He explained that “...I divorced my wife. She took everything what I had after the divorce”. He also admitted that he used to be a drunkard as the impact that he had to suffer after the divorce. In addition to relationship, the key informant 2 declared that he was cheated by his girlfriend whom he spent all his money. After he broke up with his girlfriend, he took drugs (morphine) to ‘calm’ himself and solve his problems.

The key informants’ background and past social life were very much related to the cause of being homeless before they were brought into KLHTC by non-government organisation (NGO) due to among others drug addiction, running away from home, unblessed wedding, or had been arrested which their close relatives were not willing to give them a helping hand.

Most of the key informants were reluctant to talk about their own families or relatives. Their responded like “*alaa. Tak payah cakap pasal keluarga* (translation: ...nope. No need to talk about my family” (key informant 2), “*...ntahlah, Lantaklah dia orang tahu ke tidak* (translation: ...[I] do not know. Do not care less they (the family) know or not)” (key informant 5) and “*...yang ini akak malas nak cerita. Tak nak ingat* (translation: I do not want to talk about it (family). I do not want to remember.” (key informant 6).

It is noted that the key informants came from a broken family, some of them claimed that their family members neglected them. Furthermore, some of the key informants claimed to have been divorced and which resulted to their state of being homelessness. This is because the key informants were not employed before and were fully dependent on their partners. After the divorce had been filed, they struggled to keep up with bill payments.

(ii) Employment

In terms of employment, the key informants were asked as whether they were actively looking out for jobs and all of the key informants answered ‘yes’. However, some were not currently looking for jobs because they are employed such as key informant 1, key informant 2 and key informant 4.

Those people with jobs seem to be satisfied with their current employment. As informed by Mr. A basically those people who are temporarily staying at KLHTC are those actively looking for jobs or those with jobs but need a roof.

Most of the key informants wanted to have a job for themselves but their biggest fear was insecurity pertaining to being paid or cheated. Surprisingly, as for the key informant 1 and the key informant 4 used to have a proper occupation which were a school clerk and businessman before in the state of being homeless. Out of the six key informants (n=6), none of them had experienced going through business bankruptcy.

7.2. Aspiration and Hopes

Few questions based related to aspiration and hopes were asked to the key informants. The only one thing all key informants had in mind and said was something similar like they were glad with what they had currently, but it would be better and it would feel greater to have a better life that was simple.

Key informant 4 said that she did not expect for a luxury life, but it was enough for her to have a plank house, food and a job for her own survival. While, key informant 1 also highlighted her aspiration and hope that she wanted to have affection and love from parents like other people.

While some focused on themselves and thought ways for survival, somehow rather they really missed important people in their lives like parents, siblings, family and friends as for their hopes and aspiration.

8. CONCLUSION

This study assessed various factors that lead to homelessness as well as identified hopes and aspiration of the homeless people. The factors identified are mostly centred on past social life and family as well as employment issues. Considering the facts of socio-economic problems and financial status in Malaysia, with the rapid growing of population and increase in today's cost of living, homelessness could happen to anyone, especially metropolitan city of Kuala Lumpur.

Limited resources in many aspects such as employability, education etc. have made difficult for people to compete within the society. Problematic families, unexpected domestic mishaps such as separation and divorce, physical abuse as well as drugs addiction are some examples of the common phenomenon among the homeless people nowadays.

Although some charity organisations or NGO such as Baitufiqh, Bright Atfal, Pertiwi Soup Kitchen, Kechara Soup Kitchen, Food Not Bombs and other charity organisations also help these homeless people in distributing food and clothes, it is not enough to support their needs entirely. The awareness of the homelessness issue should be created among the public because this is a social problem that is under the obligation of the society to stand together and curb homelessness.

It could be done by the simplest act of kindness, which is lending a hand as stated in a proverb "far away is far away if you don't go near" not only through some donations, but give opportunities for homeless people to secure a job despite their background and past social life. The homeless people are also part of society and they need to be loved and to be given attention despite their weaknesses. What they are experiencing now is part of their 'test' from Allah s.w.t. (the Creator), and they should be given time, space and trust as well as opportunities to change.

The researchers believe that most of the homeless people would like to have a roof to give them a shelter from sunny and rainy time, a job for them to survive especially in the urban metropolitan city like Kuala Lumpur.

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